

INSTRUMENTS OF CHANGE

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Children of immigrants and laborers hear music from a different time and place.

Fernando Contreras folded his small legs under him. He sat on his heels and stared, his head tilted back, his mouth slightly open. He had never heard of this man on the big screen wearing a wig. Johann Sebastian Bach peered down at Fernando and his classmates with an imperious smirk. It was a Tuesday morning at the mission sanctuary. Fernando, 8, had never heard Bach's music before, but now it flowed from four stringed instruments in waves of harmony like water lapping over him. Fernando loves the polka-sounding rancheras his father plays on cassettes and CDs. He says he likes "exciting music," tunes "that goes fast." He likes the rock and the cowboy songs his mom plays in their small home on Bonita Road, a street that dead-ends into a farm field. They live rimmed by fish ponds, dirt roads and mobile home parks in a town where the adults can still find jobs in citrus, tomatoes and vegetables. And if they're lucky, like Fernando's dad, in construction.

On weekends, some adults flock to this sanctuary at Beth-El Mission to unload their burdens and pray.

But on this school day, Fernando's teachers brought over his third-grade class from Wimauma Academy next door, a school mostly for children of immigrant laborers. Fourth- and fifth-graders came too.

There between two crosses, in front of a table covered in white lace, sat a string quartet. The children formed a semicircle on the floor.

The Florida Orchestra hired the quartet, called Musicians Out of the Box, through a grant from the Community Foundation of Tampa Bay.

Exposure to the arts

Teachers at Wimauma Academy have brought music and art into the classroom the past three years. The students paint, learn to play keyboards. They also take field trips to see plays and concerts.

School director Daniel Ocegüera plans to start guitar and violin lessons soon - but for only two students at a time.

"We don't have too many instruments," he explained.

Sasha von Dassow talked to the kids about Bach. "He wrote a lot of music," von Dassow said. "He also had 23 children."

"Whoa!" the students yelled.

Fernando watched silently. He clapped politely with the other students after demonstrations of the two violins, viola and

cello.

"Sean went all the way to Italy for his violin," von Dassow said of fellow quartet member Sean O'Neil.

The screen showed a map of the world with a large black dot on Florida next to the word, WIMAUMA. In Europe, a similar black dot sat next to the word ITALY.

Fernando and his family had made their own trek from Mexico. When they arrived, Fernando spoke no English.

But the serious little boy was already reading and writing in Spanish, so the school had him skip kindergarten and go straight to first grade. Two years later, he's fully bilingual, his teachers say.

Still, teachers doubt his parents will be able to afford what Fernando recently said he wants for Christmas: a keyboard.

Teaching technique

Von Dassow explained to the children how Bach liked the string instruments to chase each other in a round, just like "Row, Row, Row Your Boat."

The quartet played Mozart's A Little Night Music, which the children recognized.

Fernando and his classmates clapped out the melodies. They learned that the dancing section of Georges Bizet's Carmen was something called Habanera, a word they could pronounce better than the quartet members could - so they did, until their teachers shushed them.

After an hour, the children started to fidget. Even the three attentive girls in the long ponytails yawned.

Fernando, still sitting on his legs, didn't move.

It was time for questions.

Fernando's arm went up.

Why, someone asked, was the cello bigger than the violin? When did the musicians start playing? How long do they practice?

An inquisitive mind

Some of the students looked pleased with themselves after their questions. Others poked each other and laughed in their sleeves.

"One more question," von Dassow called out.

Fernando's arm shot up yet again.

Music teacher Hebe Tello, sitting in the back, whispered "Fernando," willing him to be called on.

Von Dassow pointed to him.

"Why do you shake your fingers a lot when playing?" he asked.

Von Dassow's eyebrows arched, impressed.

Fernando was asking about vibrato.

O'Neil explained how the technique of shaking the notes was developed a long time ago, before microphones. Shaking the note made the sound carry farther. Now it's a form of expression.

After the presentation, Fernando scrambled forward with other students for a closer look at a violin.

His favorite instruments are guitar and keyboard, he said. But he is keeping all options open.

"I would like to play the flute and recorder," he announced.

As Fernando was led out of the room with his classmates, his teachers pondered the presentation's impact.

In the end, they will have to wait and watch.

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Sound Check

Musicians Out of the Box

The string quartet will hold a concert for parents, students and staff members of Wimauma Academy at 6:30 p.m. April 26 at the school.

To contact Wimauma Academy, call (813) 672-5159.

For more information about Musicians Out of the Box, call (941) 350-2436 or visit www.musiciansoutofthebox.com.

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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PHOTO, SKIP O'ROURKE - Times: [Sean O'Neil], a member of the string quartet Musicians Out of the Box, gives third-, fourth- and fifth-grade students of Wimauma Academy a sampling of the sounds of his violin during a concert. The Florida Orchestra hired the quartet through a Community Foundation of Tampa Bay grant. PHOTO, SKIP O'ROURKE - Times: Fernando Contreras claps with other students during the quartet's performance. PHOTO, SKIP O'ROURKE - Times: A multimedia presentation projected onto a screen gives Wimauma Academy students a taste of music history. PHOTO, SKIP O'ROURKE - Times: An inquisitive Fernando Contreras peeks from between Luis Chavez, left, and Alberto Rios, right, to get a look at Sean O'Neil's violin during the string quartet's presentation in March.

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